Only Fizz

Content note: crude humor, strong language (after a certain point), mild suggestive banter, and a full body/gender/memory rewrite. Written in second person — you are the one this happens to.

I. The Believer

It's a Thursday, and you are doing absolutely nothing worth remembering.

There are two plates in the sink. There's a phone lying face-down on the counter because you keep telling yourself you'll stop checking it. There's steam coming off the kettle and a window with rain on it, and you are standing in the middle of your own kitchen in your own hometown, in a body you've had your whole life, in a life that has never once surprised you.

You're the person in the group chat who sends the link.

Debunked. Explained. Simple physics. Here's the article. You've said it out loud at parties, holding a drink, in that flat reasonable voice people use when they've decided the world is a solved problem. Ghosts are drafts. Aliens are weather balloons. Anything that can't be measured is a story somebody made up to feel better about dying.

You have never believed in anything you couldn't put your hand on. You think that's a virtue. It is, in fact, only an invitation.

Behind you, the room takes off its coat.

II. The Stranger Behind You

There's no sound exactly — more the *shape* of a sound, like fabric sliding off a shoulder in an empty room — and then the kitchen is warm in a way kitchens aren't, warm like someone is standing very close behind you and has been for a while.

You see him in the microwave door before you turn around. Tall. Six and a half feet of tall, standing under your ceiling like it's a hat that doesn't fit him.

You turn around, because that's what a reasonable person does.

He's wearing something long and dark that moves without a breeze, and his hands are folded in front of him, polite as a funeral director. His face is where your eyes keep sliding off. You look at his collar. You look at his shoes. Between those two things there is a face, you're certain of it, but every time you try to hold it, your attention wanders off on its own like a dog that's seen something in the yard.

"Oh," he says, pleased. "There you are."

"Who let you in?" you say, and you're proud of how steady that comes out. "I'm calling—"

"You don't believe in anything, do you." He tilts his head — you *feel* the tilt more than you see it. "That's my favorite kind. It makes this so much less of a conversation."

"I don't know what you're selling—"

"I'm not selling." He steps forward, and the floor doesn't seem to be involved in it. "I'm *shopping*."

And then he takes you.

Not grabs. Not tackles. He *takes*, the way you'd take a book off a shelf — one motion, no strain, no scuffle — and your feet leave the linoleum and your whole body goes weightless in his arms, held gently and completely, like something breakable. The kitchen tips. The kettle whistle gets very far away.

Your brain does the only sensible thing left to it: *this is a dream.*

You've had this one. The falling one. The one where your teeth come loose. You'll wake up with your heart going and your sheet kicked off and you'll laugh about it in the shower.

"Wake up," you say, out loud, to yourself, in his arms. "Wake up. Wake up —"

"Shh." He sounds almost fond. "This is the real part. This has always been the real part. Everything before this was the waiting room."

You hope. You genuinely, deeply hope.

You don't.

III. Fog

He opens his eyes.

Not the way eyes usually open — no lids, no motion you can catch — but one second there's nothing to look at in that face and the next there are two coins in a well, lit from the inside, and you are looking straight into them, and you cannot stop.

Something goes soft in your skull. Warm. Not unpleasant at all — that's the horrible part, that it's *pleasant*, that it comes over you like a hot bath on a cold night, like the exact instant of falling asleep on a couch with the TV on, like being told *it's fine, go ahead, it's fine*.

Your face does something it hasn't done in years. It smiles. Without asking you first.

"Good," he says. "That's better. You were going to fight me and it would have been tedious for both of us."

You want to say something sharp. You want to move.

You can't move your arms. You can't move your legs. There's a torso down there that has stopped taking requests, and a head on top of it that has stopped producing thoughts to begin with — there's nothing in there now but fog, thick and comfortable and pale, and one small bright stubborn dot of you somewhere behind it going *this is wrong, this is wrong, this is—*

The dot doesn't have lungs. The dot can't do anything. The dot goes quiet.

"Right," he says, and his hand settles on your shoulder, steadying you, because a body with no operator in it tends to tip over. "Let's get the outside sorted first. You'll want to be dressed for the inside."

He starts talking about your appearance the way a man might talk about a piece of furniture he's decided to repaint.

"You're going to be shorter."

The counter rises past your eyes. The kettle goes up with it. Somewhere in the fog, a number settles into place, tidy as a fact: five foot three.

"Everything about you that's soft is getting sharper."

Your face pushes forward, and there's no pain in it at all — nothing to endure, nothing to brace against, just *writing* — your jaw stretching out into a short, blunt, reptilian muzzle, your teeth turning long and fine and vivid neon blue behind your lip. Your ears smooth away, gone under the surface like stones under water. Your nostrils close up into nothing. Not a single hair on your head or body survives the sentence he's reading off; it all withdraws and takes its leave.

"You're red. You've always been red. Red like a thing that lives where it's hot."

It comes up from underneath, your whole surface, a deep warm red, and there's a moment — a bare half-second — where that red is the last thing on you that's still the old shape.

"Eyes next. Lime on the outside, pink on the inside. It's a good look. Costs a fortune in ink, but you get it for free."

Then the horns.

Horns, if you could see them, would be enormous once — the kind of horns an imp gets remembered for. There's a pressure at your temples, a reaching. And then a heat. Not pain. Just heat, and then a *finish*, like a door closing. When it's done there's nothing up there but the scarred stubs where they used to be, cauterized shut, and you won't wonder about it for a second, because you'll remember exactly the night it happened.

"Now the part you'll hate in mirrors."

The scar comes over you like weather. Grey-white, tight, spreading from your cheek up over your skull, swallowing most of your head — everything except the tip of your mouth and a small patch of the back of

your head, where that red still shows through, and the black dots at the ends of your mouth that finish the face off like punctuation.

"And whatever you were, sweetheart — that was a draft."

Something in your chest simplifies. Something in your hips narrows. A word that has been printed on your documents your entire life, a word you used in every form you ever filled out, a word that was never once a problem for you and never once a debate, loses its last fingerhold and drops away into the fog without a splash. You are, now, plainly, entirely, and irreversibly a *he*.

Nothing hurts. Nothing feels like *remembering*, either — that's the strangest part. It doesn't come to you as a memory or a return or a *finally*. It comes as weather. It comes as being described.

"Arms."

Your arms thin and hollow out and go glossy, black, segmented, impossible — long ribbon-thin noodle-limbs that could wrap twice around your own waist, retracting, bending in places no joint was ever meant to bend. A light blue circle sets into each shoulder, neat as a button. Light blue spots freckle your knuckles. They're cybernetic, and they're strong enough to hold a car over your head, and both of those facts are simply true and unremarkable to you.

"Legs to match."

They go the same way, boots of nothing, thin and black and endless.

"And a tail — you'd be insulted without a tail."

It comes out of the base of your spine, long and devilish and black-striped, with one white stripe down the middle, and it lifts itself behind you and moves with your breathing like it's been there the whole time. Which, of course, it has.

Then clothes, laid on you the way you'd dress someone you'd been dressing for a thousand years. A white ruff at your throat. A black collar with bells beneath it. A jester's cap in bright red and blue, striped asymmetrically — one side's pattern mirroring the other side's *not*, exactly like a pair of horns a small boy used to have — and a bell on each point that rings when your thoughts shift. Bright red front to the outfit, yellow trim at the bottom, yellow hearts along it; bright blue back, white trim, black hearts. White-and-purple striped pants and striped sleeves, bright red cuffs edged in yellow, an egg-yolk-yellow ball on each shoulder with a light red heart painted on it. Black gloves, red spots on the knuckles, yellow cuffs. Black heeled shoes with a yellow heart on the front of each.

The last thing is your tongue. It forks. It's striped. It fits behind the neon blue teeth like it was machined for the space.

You hang there in his gentle grip, dressed, and you smile at him with a face you'll recognize in the mirror in about five minutes.

IV. The Life

"Now the inside," he says. "This is the part I actually enjoy."

His voice gets very calm and very clear, the way a man's voice gets when he's reading something aloud that he wrote himself.

"You were born in Hell. You've never been anywhere else. You are hellborn — an imp. Not a sinner. Sinners are humans who died, and you were never human, don't be stupid, you've never even *seen* a human."

Your mouth moves, slow and foggy and obedient, and the voice that comes out of it is bright and fast and rough at the edges, with a comedian's crack in the middle of it — a voice you have never heard before and will never again hear described as *new*.

"Born in Hell," you say. "Never been anywhere else."

"You're a clown. You've been a clown since you could walk. You were raised in a circus tent with sawdust in your knees and a man yelling numbers at you, and you were *good* — good enough that people remembered you. You juggle. You skate. You play six instruments badly and one of them like a bastard."

"Good enough that people remembered me," you say.

"Your name is Fizzarolli. 'Fizz' if you're being friendly. 'Fizzie' if you're being sweet. There's a fire in your history, about fifteen years back, and you don't talk about it, and it's the reason your arms and legs are what they are, and the reason your horns are what they aren't, and the reason you don't look in mirrors for longer than it takes to fix your hat. There's a boy from that tent you don't speak to anymore, and it's his fault, and it's your fault, and it's nobody's fault, and it's *complicated*, and you'll get to it eventually."

"Fire," you say, slowly, in that voice. "Fifteen years back."

"You work for Mammon. He owns your face. He sells it on lunchboxes and shirts and things you don't look at too closely, and you say yes to all of it, because he made you and because you're terrified of what you are without him. Ten years running, baby. Ten years running."

"Ten years running," you say, and something behind your eyes flinches without your permission.

"And you're Ozzie's."

The fog goes a little bit pink.

"Asmodeus. The Sin of Lust. Fifteen feet of him, four faces, a temper like a furnace, and a soft spot for you the size of the Lust Ring. He calls you Fizzie Frog. He calls you Froggie. He picks you up with one hand like a bag of groceries and tells you you're the best thing he's ever had on that stage, and you believe him about half the time, and you love him all of the time, and he's loved you back for years, and you have no idea what you'd be without him, and you'd rather not find out."

You don't say anything to that one. Some part of you is smiling too hard for words.

He leans in and takes your face in both hands, thumbs on your cheekbones, and he's very close and very kind about it.

"Almost nothing left of—"

Your name arrives in your ears.

It arrives as static. A shape with no sound inside it. A word in a language you have never spoken and were never going to learn, and while it's still in the air it is already gone, and the mouth that used to answer to it does not so much as twitch.

"—huh," the entity says, mildly. "Faster than usual. Forget it, then. Forget it all. Let it fade out of you, all the way down, until there's nothing left to find."

Your smile is completely mindless.

"Guhuh, yeah..."

"There is only YOU now. Only Fizz."

"Only... only Fizz..."

It isn't a decision. It isn't a surrender. It's just the truth, the plainest thing you've ever said — the way you'd say *the sky is red* or *I have a show at nine*. It has always been the only true thing about you.

"Good boy."

His hands let go.

And the world starts to fold.

V. Waking Up Correct

Your consciousness goes out like a candle in a hallway — and while it's out, the hallway changes.

The colors flatten first. Your kitchen, the last of it, gives up its depth and becomes clean and bright and *drawn*, thick black outlines around everything, shadows in flat cel-painted wedges. The rain outside stops being water and becomes a red glow, and the red glow is the Lust Ring coming up off the skyline, and the skyline is neon and smoke and a city built on a slope like an argument. Somewhere far below, a crowd is screaming happily. Somewhere closer, someone is playing a trumpet badly and with real conviction.

It was always like this. You just hadn't been looking at it properly.

You wake up face-down on a velvet couch in a dressing room, and your bells ring when you sit up.

The mirror across from you is ringed with bulbs, and half of them are out, and the whole counter under it is a war zone of greasepaint pots, tissues, a half-eaten candy apple, a bottle of something with a name too long to read, and an airhorn sitting there with no explanation whatsoever. There's a poster of you on the wall — you, at the Ozzies, arms out, mouth open, mid-bit — with a printed signature you've signed ten thousand times.

You check yourself, fast and automatic, the way you do every time you wake up somewhere unexpected.

Clothes. Red and blue jester suit, white ruff, black collar with bells, striped pants, striped sleeves, heels on the floor where you kicked them half off. *Yours. Still yours. Thank fuck.*

Arms. Glossy black, noodle-thin, light blue circles on the shoulders, spots on the knuckles, retracting and extending with a thought. *Yours.*

Legs. Same. *Yours.*

"Okay," you mutter, and then, because you are who you are, you have to be thorough.

Your tail comes up over your shoulder, black and long and striped, and you flick it up at the light rig above the couch — hook it around the thin metal bar, take the weight, haul yourself up off the cushions and just *hang* there for a second, upside down over your own dressing room, one boot in the air.

Then, still hanging, you reach down with it, snag the bottle of something with the name too long to read off the counter, and bring it to your hand.

You drop back down onto the couch, grinning like an idiot.

"Still got it," you tell the room. "Still got all of it."

Relief, real and stupid and enormous, floods your whole dumb skinny body. Whatever that was. Whatever dream that was — and it was a dream, it was obviously a dream, you don't remember a single frame of it, but it was one of those heavy ones, the kind that leaves a dent — you're awake now, in real life, in your own clothes, in your own arms and legs and tail, in your own dressing room at the Ozzies. You're you. You're Fizzarolli. You've always been Fizzarolli, and you've never been anything else, and you never will be.

You catch your reflection and stop.

"Ugh," you say, to your scar. You fix your hat. You tilt your head one way, then the other, and the bells ring and the stripes go asymmetrical and it's fine, it's fine, it's just a face you see every single day.

"Still handsome-ish," you say. And then, because you genuinely are embarrassed: "Passed out in my own dressing room. Like an *amateur*." You rub the back of your neck. "Ten years running and I fall asleep on the couch. Oz is gonna give me shit for this for a week."

You stand up. You shake yourself out, shoulder to shoulder, and your bells settle into their usual chatter.

You've got a show. You've got a show in — you check the clock — oh, that's soon. That's very soon.

Before you can get to the door, it opens.

VI. Ozzie's

It opens and keeps opening, and then it's full of Asmodeus.

Fifteen feet of him: robes that swallow the doorframe, two faces turning slowly where a head should be and one of them with horns and one of them with a ring through its nose, both of them wreathed in blue-and-purple flame that makes the mirror bulbs look like they're broken. His presence takes up the whole corridor, and the corridor is delighted about it.

"There he is," he says. The voice comes out of everywhere. "There's my little jester."

"Oz." You put your hands on your hips. "Do you ever knock, or is that a rich-people thing you're too big for?"

He ignores that entirely and crouches, and one enormous hand slides under you and *lifts*, and your heels come off the floor, and now you're six feet in the air in the crook of his arm like a ventriloquist's doll, and your tail curls around for balance on pure instinct.

"Babe—" you start, furious and delighted. "Put me down, you giant *fuck* —"

"You were out cold." He says it gently, and one huge thumb brushes over the scar at your temple, careful as anything. "I watched you go down on the monitor. All that noise out there and you just folded up on the couch like a—"

"I did *not* fold—"

"—like a little frog that got sleepy."

"Froggie's banned," you say. "New rule. Froggie's banned in this dressing room."

"You love it."

"I *tolerate* it." You slap his wrist, which does about as much as slapping a wall would. "You know what's not gonna tolerate it? My eight o'clock. Which is in—" you twist in his grip to look at the clock and sag — "two minutes. Two minutes, Oz. I've got paint on half my face and one shoe on."

"Then you'd better make it one." And then, quieter, with the heat in it dropping down low: "You look good like this, you know. All rumpled. All out of breath."

"I'm not gonna be *all out of breath* with a full house watching, so you can put that thought in the bin."

"You wound me."

"I'll wound you harder if you don't—" you point at his face, one of them, "—put me on the floor, my king."

He does not put you on the floor. He brings you in first, close to the flame, and it's warm and it doesn't burn, and his voice rumbles down into your chest like something being tuned.

"Two minutes," he says. "Go on, then. Go be perfect."

"Always am," you say, and your voice does the thing it does, the little crack at the end that ruins the whole bit, and he hears it, of course he hears it, and he laughs like an avalanche and sets you down so gently the heels don't even clack.

You straighten your ruff. You check your hat. You tug the red cuff, and the yellow trim, and you swat the airhorn off the counter without looking because it's in your way and it deserves it.

You don't remember ever being anything else.

There's no version of you in this room that stands where a sink and a kettle used to be, no name on any document, no Thursday, no rain. It's not forgotten. Forgotten would leave a hole. There's simply nothing there anymore, the way there's nothing where a wall used to be before the building was built.

The corridor outside pumps with bass. The crowd out there is already screaming — a whole theater of imps and worse, on their feet, waiting for the jester.

The doors open at the end of the hall and the red light comes in.

You go out toward it, bells ringing, tail swaying, whistling, a little bit of sawdust still stuck in your knees after all these years.

Today is just another day at Ozzie's.

You've got a show to do.

You always have. You always will.